Tribe Sees Its Culture Drying Up. The Hoopa are fighting to keep water, diverted for agricultural use, in the Trinity River to save the fish and their way of life.

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HOOPA, California

They've clung stubbornly to this valley for 10,000 years. When the white man came, the Hoopa tribe endured waves of fortune seekers and government agents. As it always had, the band survived on its members' wits and on the bounty of the Trinity River. Now the tribe believes it is in the battle of its life, trying to save the river itself. Before dams and water diversions, the Trinity River roared through this remote reservation in a frothy torrent, noisy as a parade of locomotives. The cold tributary to the Klamath River brought salmon and steelhead trout runs so thick that elders boasted you could cross the river on the backs of fish. Heavy flows scoured the riverbanks, exposing wiry tree roots that members of the tribe wove into intricate baskets. The U.S. government, intent on tapping the West's major rivers, tunneled through a mountain range 40 years ago to drain the Trinity for the benefit of Central Valley farms. In some years, as much as 90% of its water headed south.

As the river sank, fish runs dwindled. The Hoopa worried that their way of life might finally disappear. "It cuts part of you away, from the heart," said Margaret Dickson, a Hoopa councilwoman. The tribe has battled ever since to save the Trinity. Success finally seemed at hand 2 1/2 years ago, with a federal promise to increase flows to about half the historic volume. The Hoopa figured that would be just enough to stop the strangulation of the river. But farmers who depend on the Trinity's waters shackled that deal with a lawsuit. And, as so often happens now in the West, the U.S. 9th Circuit Court of Appeals probably will decide the Trinity River's destiny later this year.

Dan O'Hanlon, attorney for the Hoopa's prime opponent, Westlands Water District, admits a grudging respect for the tribe. "They are tenacious," O'Hanlon said. "And they are definitely keeping score by how much water is returned. They feel they've been ripped off for 40 years. Now they want their water back." The Trinity divides the Hoopa Valley tribe's 12-by-12-mile reservation, its boundaries a perfect square amid the undulation of California's North Coast. An hour's drive east of Eureka, the valley is a mix of natural beauty and subdued poverty.

Though many California tribes these days hit it big with casino gambling, the Hoopa are too isolated to cash in. They operate a tiny gambling hall, the Lucky Bear Casino, right next to the reservation's only grocery store. It provides only a few jobs in a valley with a 40% unemployment rate. The big action comes the day welfare checks arrive. Outsiders rarely venture in to yank the slots. The Hoopa like that just fine. They prefer the old traditions anyway. The closest thing to industry is the tribal timber firm, which boasts of its eco-friendly, sustainable logging.

Above all else, it is the river that sets the mood on the reservation. When the Trinity runs strongly, tribal leaders say, the valley's inhabitants seem buoyed. "It's a very important part of who we are," said Norma McAdams, a counselor on the reservation. Salmon, steelhead and Pacific lamprey fed the generations. Every extended family in the 2,200-member tribe has a few designated fishermen, who stretch nets into the river at night and haul them in by morning. Time was, crowds of salmon migrating upstream made the Trinity look as if it were running backward, said Lee McCardie, 89. Now, they say, it takes a week to snag what a man once caught in a day. Chinook salmon, a mainstay on the tribal dinner table, have declined by 80%.

A big cause, biologists say, is the river's reshaping in the 20th century. With dams standing in the way, spring flows from the frigid snowmelt of the jagged Trinity Alps to the east no longer pack the punch to scour the river clean of smothering silt. Long sections have grown narrow and deep, cut off from the gravelly backwaters that once acted as a nursery for fish. Even so, clans hold tightly to their family fishing holes. But few are productive anymore. Carlson Kane, 66, remembers the glory days at his family's pocket beside Marshall Rock. It has slumped with the years, filling with mud and becoming useless. To lose a fishing hole," Kane lamented, "is to lose something valuable to the valley."

The Hoopa diet is a casualty as well. The tribe's diabetes rate is seven times the national average, Hoopa leaders say. Many blame that on a shift to the white man's starches as the fish declined. "Our staples used to be acorns and salmon; now it's potatoes," McCardie said. "So many people are dying young of heart attacks and strokes." Though the tribe talks of suffering, the Trinity's water has helped irrigate the agricultural bonanza of the Central Valley. Each diverted drop makes a remarkable trip, flowing through 17-foot-wide tunnels bored through the Trinity Mountains, then pouring into the Sacramento River. The torrent then runs south to the Sacramento--San Joaquin Delta, where it is sucked up by massive pumps and continues via aqueduct through California's breadbasket.

"There's been enormous economic growth due to the construction of the Trinity project," said Jeff McCracken, spokesman for the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, which, over the last century, built the dams and canals that irrigated much of the West. But that farming boom has been accompanied by unintended problems on the river. The federal government has grappled for two decades over the slide in salmon and steelhead populations. "We certainly know an awful lot more now than we did then," McCracken said.

Despite the fishing decline, many stick to the old ways. Stan Ferris heads out to the shingle-covered shack he uses as a smokehouse when the cool breath of evening grabs his bones. His weathered face shaded by a battered straw cowboy hat, Ferris stacks the morning catch on a lattice of sticks crisscrossing the old shed, then ignites a smoldering fire on the dirt floor. The key, he confides, is a lot of smoke and a little heat. Ferris, 68, describes himself as a fisherman, carpenter and electrician, in that order. He worries about the future and that even more water will be taken from the Trinity. Its present state

is bad enough."We live off this river, but they're shipping a lot of it down south," he said. "Giving some back would help."

Bonnie Jackson, 41, rues the way the river's decline has hit the honored tradition of basketry. She has gathered shoots and boughs with her mother and aunts on the Trinity's banks since childhood. The river's purposeful hand scoured the floodplains, leaving a bounty of willow roots exposed for the taking. Now that the coveted roots are hard to come by, Jackson said, "we're not in balance."

Ceremonial life has sometimes been a casualty. Consider the last Boat Dance. Dozens of performers put on elaborate headdresses of eagle feathers and vests of wolf fur, then took dugout redwood canoes into the same traditional bend to call for plentiful fish, health and world peace. One of the ceremonial canoes hit an exposed rock and the narrow boat overturned, flinging the performers into the river. Antique costumes were drenched. Unbowed, the performers drained the canoe, then headed back out. "Them diverting water to the Central Valley and we weren't going to let it stop our dance," said Merv George, 30. But the moment's symbolic value wasn't lost on anyone, he added. "We all witnessed why we're fighting for this river." This fight befits a tribe that always stood its ground.

The U.S. government tried to uproot the Hoopa in 1865, then again in 1890, tribal leaders say. The Hoopa resisted, preferring starvation and death to forced removal, said Clifford Lyle Marshall, who once taught law at UCLA but returned to Hoopa and became tribe chairman. "We feel an obligation to protect and respect this land of our ancestors." The slow draining of the river sneaked up in a way the U.S. cavalry never could. Lawmakers offered soothing assurances as Congress sealed the deal in 1955 to dam the Trinity and dig massive tunnels to siphon away most of the river. Rep. Clair Engle, the local Democratic congressman, vowed that not one bucketful needed for the Trinity would be shipped to the Central Valley. But the diversions increased and the river dwindled. The Hoopa joined with environmentalists to wage one of California's most protracted water wars.

Federal authorities finally admitted in the early 1980s that dams and diversions had caused trouble. But studies to determine how to fix the problems dragged on for years. Finally, a restoration plan that would increase the river flow and cut diversions to farmers won approval in December 2000, the last weeks of the Clinton administration. Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt arrived in a canoe for the riverbank ceremony. The Westlands Water District, serving the dry western side of the San Joaquin Valley 300 miles south, stood to lose the most if diversions were cut, and sued immediately. District officials took the tack of using environmental law, arguing that the effects of reduced water flow on farmers and the fragile ecology of the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta had been studied insufficiently, despite years of review.

Westlands lawyer O'Hanlon said the Hoopa often fail to mention that the Trinity is sullied by years of gold mining and logging. He contends that they focus too much on water, too little on solving the river's ills. Westlands supports ongoing efforts to restore

spawning grounds by reshaping the Trinity's banks with bulldozers so that more water reaches the flat, cobble-strewn plains where salmon like to lay their eggs. So far, Westlands has been able to keep the water coming its way. Even if the Hoopa win at the 9th Circuit, the Trinity will flow at only half of its historical volume.

The tribe hopes it's enough to increase threatened fish runs. Few events galvanized the Hoopa like the fish die-off of 2002. The Trinity flows into the Klamath River at the reservation's northern edge, joining the Klamath for a dash to the sea 45 miles away. On this stretch, more than 33,000 fish mostly Chinook salmon, the bulk of them headed for the Trinity died last October of gill rot. California Fish and Game biologists blamed anemic water flows for the disease. Ronda Marshall wanted her third-grade class at Hoopa elementary to understand what had happened. So she gave the students an assignment: Write the numbers from one to 33,000 on paper to make tangible the enormity of the loss. Her class reached 6,600 before Marshall gave them a reprieve. Those lists, in the big, looping scrawl of 8-year-olds, are affixed now to a roll of river-blue construction paper nearly as long as the classroom. Drawings of salmon swim alongside.

The children also wrote to U.S. Interior Secretary Gale Norton. "The farmers don't need all our water," one little girl said. "They should think about our fish." Norton didn't write back. Her spokesman had no comment. Not far from the riverbank is a plain little building, newly erected. It is a small-scale fish processing factory, where a few tribal entrepreneurs hope to mass-produce 8-ounce cans of smoked Trinity River salmon. Despite the slumping fish runs, this new enterprise got off the ground with the hopeful zeal of a venture capital deal in Silicon Valley. Several tribe members pooled their savings to build the place. They got stock and the promise of an eventual payoff. So far, it hasn't worked out. The October grand opening came at the cusp of the fish die-off downriver. Instead of a planned 20,000 cans of "Indian Kippered Wild Salmon," the plant produced just 1,400. In the factory, stainless-steel sinks and refrigerators sit idle, sharing space with an $8,000 smoker oven.

Danny Jordan, Hoopa commerce director, remains upbeat. If the fish rebound, he figures the factory can gross $7 million a year. It can ratchet down unemployment, providing jobs that have meaning to a tribe trying to hew to traditions of the past. "It's a way to hang onto our culture," Jordan said. "This is an alternative to casinos and destination resorts. We don't want to be a Disneyland."